

NOVEMBER 13, 1986

Winter is close enough now that it's safe to predict that we are going to survive the summer of '86 mosquito epidemic. The cool mornings are slowing the dark winged killers down to low altitude flights. As late as the last week in October, however, cowboys and their saddle horses were still donating blood to the most vicious cycle of blood drinkers the Shortgrass Country had ever produced.

South and a little east of the ranch, I'd heard they were shooting into them to break them into smaller bunches. Here at the ranch they were making their last stands in the tall grass growing in the natural lake beds.

When we were getting our lambs off, we began to notice also that the rattlesnakes were working their way down into the rocky crevices and caves in the bottoms of these same dry lake beds. I can't swear that these diamond backs were running from the heavy swarms of mosquitoes; yet from the way their rattles were broken off short, and by them hibernation so early, something had been chousing them, and whatever it was had the upper hand.

Coffee house story tellers manufacture so many wild snake and mosquito tales I hesitate to submit scientific papers. My evidence can be checked by placing a Shortgrass mosquito's head underneath a high power magnifying glass or a low power microscope. Instead of having a sharp pointed beak like a Southern Dagger, or the Georgia Needlepoint, or the Florida Hollow Dart, ours have a tapered beak that forms a slight spoonbill that'll work underneath the scaly skin of a reptile.

I can't explain why only a desert insect is armed as such, unless it's part of that grand scheme of nature that keeps the creatures from overeating on the alligators and water snakes that abound in the swamplands. I do know that mosquitoes that drink rattle snake blood have a mean disposition. They are easy to spot as they will always be the first to crumple from cold weather and can further be observed striking at their own reflections in ponds and against window panes.

We had over an inch of cold rain last night. North winds have whipped in behind the storm. Mosquitoes and rattlesnakes had better make their peace and head for their winter nests. This is a hard country for a man of a scientific nature.